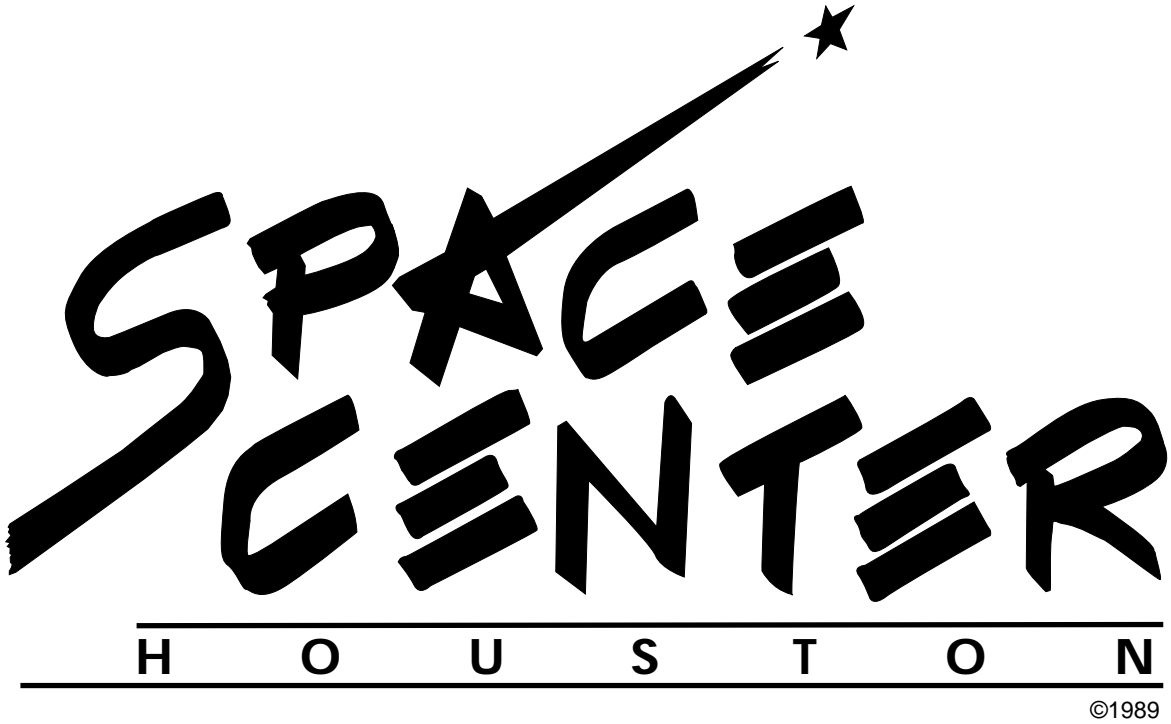


Visitor Voyage

A JSC team is working to expand the NASA experience



By Karen Schmidt

On the fifth anniversary of the opening of Space Center Houston, a team of employees is looking at ways to help the center's official visitor connection expand the public's experiences.

The Vision Team, made up of employees from most JSC directorates and Space Center Houston, is in the early stages of developing new ways to showcase JSC work. Pilot programs developed by the team are receiving a "thumbs up" from visitors. In a few short months, several brainstorming sessions have produced ideas that will enable visitors to experience more of JSC's programs and projects.

"We are considering all visitors, both physical and virtual," said Engineering's Phil West, co-chairman of the Vision Team with Michelle Munk. "We are hoping that anybody who visits JSC, either physically or through a number of audiovisual avenues, can say they know more about NASA and feel a part of the program."

With so many programs ongoing at the center, the Vision Team hopes to reach audiences in a variety of ways.

"This center is so rich," West said. "We are sitting in Jed Clampett's back yard and we're not drilling like we could be. The resources are incredible and we'd like to tap into them in new ways to get the story out."

The effort began in May, when the team learned about Space Center Houston's visions and goals and developed ideas to enhance the public's visit both at the visitor center and on-site.

"This project has come in what I call two phases," West said. "Phase 1 was a lot of brainstorming on what we could do and Phase 2 is further brainstorming and implementation. We are still in the very early growth stages."

Brainstorming sessions produced several ideas. A pilot program last month offered live video feeds from JSC's KC-135 with two-way question and answer capabilities to visitors at Space Center Houston. During

the "Interactive Video Spot," West explained to visitors a new space suit test under way and guests were able to ask questions about the test and its scientists.

"We wanted to have the capability to get video data downlinked in real time to the scientists so they could update testing procedures if needed," West said. "While we were hooking up for the scientists, why not bring in Space Center Houston and let the public see the testing, too? Through the help of the Avionic Systems Division, the Imagery and Publications Office and the folks at the KC-135 office, we were able to demonstrate the effectiveness of this tool for both science and education."

By the end of the week of testing, the team had hooked up to the test's principal investigator, Space Center Houston, and two teacher education workshops on-site. On one day of testing, the team hooked up to three different groups during the same flight.

"We are bringing activities to people and people to activities that cannot be brought to them at Space Center Houston or through a tram tour," Munk said. "This is another way for guests to see what's going on when it is not physically possible to be there."

Interactive Video Spots could be widely used for a variety of audiences besides Space Center Houston, including the Internet and NASA Television. These short live spots can be used throughout the center to showcase actual work in progress and bring visitors closer to what is going on real time at JSC.

Plans are in the work to do live video conferences with the next crew to live and work in the air-tight chamber in Bldg. 7 during the Lunar/Mars Life Support Test Program Phase III. The crew will enter the chamber on Sept. 16 for a 90-day test of recyclable air and water systems. Preliminary plans call for the crew to conduct several virtual visits with Space Center Houston guests. In addition, the Vision Team is exploring new ways to showcase the X-38 project. Possibilities

include live video feeds from Bldg. 220, a new tram stop at the facility and enhancement of the current exhibit at Space Center Houston.

While virtual visits are a quick way to get visitors closer to current work, the team also is working on ideas regarding on-site facilities and access during shuttle missions. Bringing visitors closer to missions had already been expanded before the Vision Team was formed. Tram tours are now stopping at Teague Auditorium to let visitors sit in on post-flight crew briefings and daytime launches. In addition, possibly as soon as STS-86, the Mission Control Center viewing room will be open for Space Center Houston guests during missions. Work also is under way to provide a visitor stop and historical multimedia presentation in the old third floor Flight Control Room and to get more visitors to the Sonny Carter Training Facility where guests can learn about the work that is done in the Neutral Buoyancy Laboratory.

The Vision Team also is working on broadening the visitor experience inside Space Center Houston. One idea to make guests feel closer to the space program has already been implemented. A banner designed for each shuttle flight and operations crew will be displayed at the visitor center and guests will be encouraged to sign their greetings to the mission team. The STS-86 banner is now posted and plans call for it to be prominently displayed for JSC workers during the mission.

Another idea on the drawing board is to improve the communication process to make sure the public gets the most current information. The Vision Team has recognized that the Space Center Houston employees are personally delivering JSC's message to the public.

"Mission Operations representatives have great ideas about using center training already in progress and special events prior to missions to bring Space Center Houston briefing officers, tour guides and other staff more up to date," West said. "As a pilot, they have arranged a pre-flight briefing about STS-86."

West said tour guides can let visitors know, "Hey I talked to the flight control team before the flight and this is what they said."

The team also is looking at improving the walk up experience at Rocket Park. "There are a lot of visitors who walk up just to take pictures of the Saturn V rocket," West said. "We want to look at having information about our websites and JSC available there to invite guests to visit in more depth later. We also could develop a photo opportunity spot where visitors could just pull through a drive and take a picture. Ideas like this one will certainly require resources and we'll have to request the necessary support and approvals on a case-by-case basis."

In addition to improving what the visitor sees at the time of his or her visit, the team would like to provide guests with upcoming activity information.

"We don't want the public to feel like once they have been there they have seen it all," Munk said. "We are working with Space Center Houston to develop upcoming schedules to give to guests when they leave."

Employees interested in participating in bringing their job closer to visitors can call West at x39236 or Munk at x31109.

"We would love employees to call us or their directorate representative and let us know know if they want to discuss their work with our visitors," West said. "We could potentially bring their work to the public via video spots, have special tram stops or even have employees take their work to the visitor center."

The Vision Team's effort comes at a time when the public's excitement in space exploration is high.

"The drama aboard Mir and the Mars Pathfinder mission is holding the public's interest," West said. "With attendance at Space Center Houston breaking records, the Vision Team hopes to seize this opportunity, exploring new ways to fulfill NASA's mission to communicate scientific knowledge and give the public 'Intelligent Fun.'" □



From top to bottom left to right: 1) Suit engineer and test subject Susan Cupples of the Crew and Thermal Systems Division waves to observers on the ground during a break on the recent Martian gravity KC-135 flights. 2) Phil West of the Crew and Thermal Systems Division fields questions from guests at Space Center Houston during an Interactive Video Spot last month. The live video to Space Center Houston and interactivity with guests is one way JSC is bringing on-going projects to the center's visitors. 3) West describes to visitors where the test team is pretending to be. 4) West demonstrates the transition to Martian gravity by tossing a Mars globe. A new team of JSC employees is trying to broaden communication so that the public gets the most current information about JSC's programs and projects. While the team is in its infancy, ideas are already in the works to make guests feel closer to the space program.

Video Stills
by Bob Armstrong and
Ricky Villarreal

